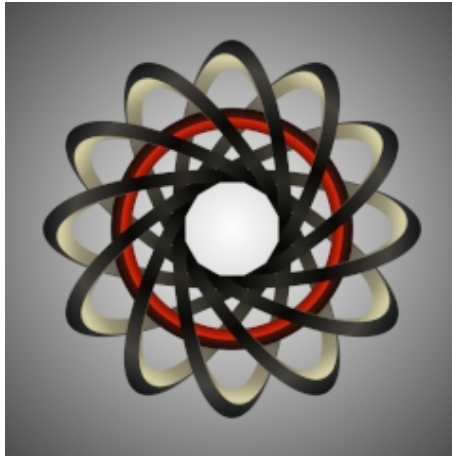


Idries Shah's Sufi Paradigm



breaking the mould

Etienne de L'Amour

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Paradigms

According to the American Heritage Dictionary, a paradigm may be defined thus [1]:

- One that serves as a pattern or model.
- A set of assumptions, concepts, values, and practices that constitutes a way of viewing reality for the community that shares them, especially in an intellectual discipline.

Wonderful tools that creative paradigms may be, the first issue with paradigms is that assumptions are made, often without realizing it and hence without examining those assumptions to find what Shah once referred to as “the assumptions behind your assumptions.”

The second issue is “the map is not the territory” as Alfred Korzybski put it. The word is not the thing defined. A paradigm is an artificial mental construct and especially in the realms of metaphysics and mysticism, the mind can take us only so far, beyond which it is simply not up to the task. Nor is understanding the same as ownership.

The third issue is that once a paradigm has been adopted, this can make it difficult to see outside of that box and move on to further work or better alternatives.



Paradigm Paralysis

A Wikipedia article on the paradigm [2] has this to say:

“Perhaps the greatest barrier to a paradigm shift, in some cases, is the reality of paradigm paralysis [or fixation], the inability to see [and hence move] beyond the current models of thinking [3]. Examples include Galileo's theory of a heliocentric universe.”

Closed Systems, Paradigms and Ideology

As previously referenced in the document “Paradigm Shift”, there are yet more serious drawbacks to paradigms:

"A paradigm is a self-contained [, self-referential] or closed system of meanings within which every problem is explained (or ignored). The paradigm of science is a mechanistic and materialistic world of physical causality (a world of facts and the relationships between facts). One way to approach the meaning of anything is to investigate the causal relationships of which it is a part.”

“Hand-in-hand with a paradigm goes an ideology, which is a self-contained system of values. An ideology is just another name for a closed system of thinking. A closed system of thought occurs when any framework of knowledge tries to ask and answer all questions concerning values and standards within its own boundaries. Such a system does not lead to the acceptance of any knowledge that is outside those boundaries [nor from those outside its recognized practitioner fraternity].” [4]

Idries Shah

In his writings, amongst many other things, the Sufi mystic Idries Shah worked long and hard to re-present information, concepts and methods that have long fallen into misuse and degeneration or which he found lacking in the contemporary West.

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One of the key elements that Shah worked on in his writings was that of the paradigm as a closed and confining system of thought and action, though as far as I am aware he did not use that term; though his work is infused with the concept.

When you read about the legend of the islanders, a key note story at the beginning of his seminal work, *The Sufis*, and hear words like “not a prison but a cage with invisible bars”; when you read the words “a model prisoner”; “confined thinking”; “closed system”; “set of assumptions”; “permanently concealed prejudice”; prototype; model; design; “the wards of the lock”; exemplar; conditioning; conventional science vs. revolutionary science ... I could go on at great length ... instead substitute and read the word “paradigm” and it all makes another coherent kind of sense.

Shah appears to have deliberately set out to not only re-present a transcendent action-philosophy but also to create the ultimate transcendent paradigm, one which subsumes all wisdom and even our notion of what God, nearness to the Beloved, and Reality are all about.

In the case of conditioning, which is a major phenomenon explored in Shah's work, what we're dealing with might be likened to a rootkit. That is, a system of malware that hides itself below the awareness threshold and beyond the reach of the host operating system; which may download further components; change its signature, and evolve in order to continue to evade detection and capture.

By the time the malware has installed itself, without expert intervention it's probably too late to look for ways in which to opt out. And given time, the infection may come to be accepted as the norm; even something that's desirable or necessary.

Shah's work, too, involved the use of a kind of rootkit, in my opinion. To bastardize a quote from *Lord of the Rings*, he created “one paradigm to bind them all,” or to borrow the term from computing: “One rootkit to bind them all”.

Closed and Open Concepts: God and Being

In the first chapter of *The Power of Now*, entitled “You are not your mind”, Eckhart Tolle has this to say about the concept of “God” [5]:

“Q: When you say Being, are you talking about God? If you are, then why don't you say it?”

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“A: The word God has become empty of meaning through thousands of years of misuse. I use it sometimes, but I do so sparingly. By misuse, I mean that people who have never even glimpsed the realm of the sacred, the infinite vastness behind that word, use it with great conviction, as if they knew what they are talking about. Or they argue against it, as if they knew what it is that they are denying. This misuse gives rise to absurd beliefs, assertions, and egoic delusions, such as 'My or our God is the only true God, and your God is false,' or Nietzsche's famous statement 'God is dead.'

“The word God has become a closed concept. The moment the word is uttered, a mental image is created, no longer, perhaps, of an old man with a white beard, but still a mental representation of someone or something outside you, and, yes, almost inevitably a male someone or something.

“Neither God nor Being nor any other word can define or explain the ineffable reality behind the word, so the only important question is whether the word is a help or a hindrance in enabling you to experience That toward which it points. Does it point beyond itself to that transcendental reality, or does it lend itself too easily to becoming no more than an idea in your head that you believe in, a mental idol?

“The word Being explains nothing, but nor does God. Being, however, has the advantage that it is an open concept ...”

Of course as well as being a concept, Being is also a Reality. It is both the way and the means and also the goal. Having said that, we should remember that 'the reality is near, the concept far.'

Idries Shah:

The Impasse and the Dark Night of the Soul

There are many folk who, though not formally admitted to Idries Shah's school, have studied his works in depth for years, even a few decades and some of them have finally started to bump up against apparent boundaries set by the paradigm and either ended up at or passed through a difficult impasse or dark night of the soul following his death in 1996.

This has led some to a state of paradigm paralysis and a state of “woe is me; by myself (without a living Master to instruct and guide me) I can do nothing”, fearful of making mistakes through their not being perfect; fearful of failure, of the unknown and of ridicule, and often quite desperate to break free from this paralysis and move on.

And since Shah's death, it's not just a matter of bumping up against the limits of the prevailing paradigm, but also the constraints and the rules and regs – and not least the wardens – of what was once a living reality and has now become crystallized into the prevailing paradigm. This was made abundantly clear in a recent discussion in an on-line forum when one of the regulars, a long-time student of Shah, proposed that a study group be set up to read Shah's work in a manner that Shah appeared to indicate in his writing. The idea of forming a “Sufi study group” clearly contra-indicated by what Shah had written about such “folly”, the word “Sufi” had been dropped. Anyhow, to cut a long story short, even having backtracked from “study group” to “preparatory study group” and finally to “glorified book club”, he eventually felt compelled to conclude that even that would have been seen as illegitimate in Shah's eyes, for lack of a Living Master to instruct and guide and individually prescribe.

As I said at that time: “Not to put too fine a point on it, I can see you being quoted chapter and verse, with brass knobs on, from the materials associated with the paradigm – to show that such study of the materials of that self-same paradigm is illegitimate.

“And in the process of adhering to 'the letter of the law', the 'spirit' of exemplars like Roger Bacon and his 'scientific method of inductive proceeding' will probably not provide sufficient weight to counteract such an intellectual and ideological onslaught.”

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And so it came to pass; another group initiative was nipped in the bud and the paradigm paralysis and dark night of the soul was resumed.

For a wonderful and extensive description of the Dark Night of the Soul, see reference 6 at the end of this document.

The experience of the dark night of the soul also finds echoes in 'The Tale of the Sands' which Shah presents in his book *Tales of the Dervishes*, which offers a way out of the impasse via acceptance, submission and grace.

The Tale of the Sands

A stream, from its source in the far off mountains, passing through every kind and description of countryside, at last reached the sands of the desert. Just as it has crossed every other barrier, the stream tried to cross this one, but it found that as fast as it ran into the sand, its waters disappeared.

It was convinced, however, that its destiny was to cross this desert, and yet there was no way. Now a hidden voice, coming from the desert itself, whispered: "The Wind crosses the desert, and so can the stream."

The stream objected that it was dashing itself against the sand, and only getting absorbed: that the wind could fly, and this was why it could cross a desert.

"By hurtling in your own accustomed way you cannot get across. You will either disappear or become a marsh. You must allow the wind to carry you over, to your destination."

But how could this happen? "By allowing yourself to be absorbed in the wind."

This idea was not acceptable to the stream. After all, it had never been absorbed before. It did not want to lose its individuality. And, once having lost it, how was one to know that it could ever be regained?

"The wind," said the sand, "performs this function. It takes up water, carries it over the desert, and then lets it fall again. Falling as rain, the water becomes a river."

"How can I know that this is true?"

"It is so, and if you do not believe it, you cannot become more than a quagmire, and even that could take many, many years; and it certainly is not the same as a stream."

"But can I not remain the same stream I am today?"

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“You cannot in either case remain so,” the whisper said. “Your essential part is carried away and forms a stream again. You are called what you are even today because you do not know which part of you is the essential one.”

When he heard this, certain echoes began to arise in the thoughts of the stream. Dimly, he remembered a state in which he -- or some part of him, was it? -- had been held in the arms of a wind. He also remembered -- or did he? -- that this was the real thing, not necessarily the obvious thing, to do.

And the stream raised his vapour into the welcoming arms of the wind, which gently and easily bore it upwards and along, letting it fall softly as soon as they reached the roof of a mountain, many, many miles away. And because he had his doubts, the stream was able to remember and record more strongly in his mind the details of the experience. He reflected, “Yes, now I have learned my true identity.”

The stream was learning. But the sands whispered: “We know, because we see it happen day after day: and because we, the sands, extend from the riverside all the way to the mountain.”

And that is why it is said that the way in which the Stream of Life is to continue on its journey is written in the Sands.

The only instructions provided following Shah's death were along the lines of “Shah said keep reading the books”, “Shah said his books are his successor” and “Shah said that the answers to all your questions are in his books.” And yet surely Shah must have seen this impasse coming? Surely someone must have spoken to him about the consequences of building up an empire and “correspondence school” as he did?

Shah's work more than adequately covers the process of working on the commanding self and the nafs, the preparatory work of learning how to learn as he calls it and the vast corpus of teaching stories he published, as well as his more didactic prose (and not least the humour and warmth of his live lectures). All this helps by indirect means in developing such faculties as the observing self, holistic thinking and intuition. But when it comes to the realm of opening one's heart and awakening to a way of Being, either these things are not there in his writings or are but have gone unnoticed, or are perhaps reserved for groups working with a living exemplar.

OK, you say: so go out and find a living Teacher (either in the Sufi tradition or in some other such as Buddhism, Zen or Taoism). Well for those who've read their Shah, Shah has deliberately provided authoritative and self-referential answers to just about every question you might care to ask. Look at the several scattered passages he's written about the characteristics of a real school or a real

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teacher or fakery and you may find that few, other than Shah himself (and alas he's moved on from this mortal coil) would fit the bill. Road closed.

Well, of course, some will point to Shah's late elder brother Omar-Ali Shah (now succeeded by his son Arif) and the fact that the initials OAS and IS form the word OASIS, which they suggest means that although they “agreed to differ” and go their separate ways, though seeming to be working in opposition, in reality they are working together. Here in the Rules or Secrets of the Naqshbandi Order as presented by Omar Ali-Shah we have Mindfulness in its broadest sense and many forms. For some, OAS has provided a welcome sanctuary following Shah's death; for others who know their Shah, again the road is closed.

Trust me: Shah has an answer for everything. Not least that only those inside the system can understand what goes on within, not “externalists”: on the face of it the ultimate “shutter-upper”. Visit an internet group devoted to Shah, say a few heretical things and you're almost sure to be quoted chapter and verse with brass knobs on.

OK, you say: let's google 'mindfulness', find some exercises in concentrative meditation and mindfulness and do our own thing. Well, if you read Shah, again he has a great many things to say about the perils of unprescribed exercises and the vanity and heedlessness of going it alone.

At the end of the day, we have to start somewhere, however. Surely Shah would not have wanted us to remain paralysed through fear of the unknown or of not doing the right thing as we're not perfect Sufis? As the Nasrudin tale has it:

Mullah Nasrudin went to the shop of a man who stocked all kinds of bits and pieces. "Have you got nails?," he asked. "Yes." "And leather, good leather?" "Yes." "And twine?" "Yes." "And dye?" "Yes." "Then why, for Heaven's sake, don't you make a pair of boots?"

At the end of the day, I for one get the impression that Shah has created a very expansive and rich but nevertheless closed, self-referential system with no independent watchdog (except for mention of “The Office” to be found only in Shah's works). It is a system that generates a vast amount of unfinished business (unclosed gestalts). Closure is often provided after a delay through the scattering of material through the currently studied and subsequent books. Some is left open and may be closed only through life experiences and contact with a Sufi Teacher at a later date (which for so many never happens). It is a system designed to wear out intellectual and emotional approaches; to goad us onward until we arrive at a point of crisis, squeezing out our proverbial pips, and holding us there in what some call the dark night of the soul; deliberately limiting our

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options to just a few possibilities: to throw in the towel and look elsewhere or to look toward God

... Or toward Mindfulness and Being which stand outside this labyrinthine paradigm, at least in practise. Sure, Shah wrote about these things (and effectively put a veto on them), but that's not enough. They're only worth something if there's a practical follow-up. Of course, to follow this route requires that one willingly set aside the "Shah party line" with all its rules and regs and just go for it.

On that particular note, I feel it only fair to spell out what Shah had to say on this matter:

Shah on Exercises in Mindfulness

In *A Perfumed Scorpion*, discussing the Eleven Rules of the Naqshbandi – Sufi mindfulness, if you like – Shah has this to say:

"The way in which these exercises are carried out is a matter for personal tuition. The teacher monitors and prescribes for alterations in awareness which follow these practices. They are subject to careful adjustment and cannot be automatically performed.

"Certain special movements and visualizations, combined with other factors, are employed in various schemes of the Sufis to help to develop subtler stages of consciousness.

"Luckily, most people who involve themselves in imitations of these studies on their own initiative stay at the stage where they do little harm to themselves or to others. It is, in fact, far better that they should play at being mystics than that they should become obsessional or fall into the hands of charlatans

"These schemata, as I have said, part of an ongoing and complete tradition, are of little value simply on the printed page, and even less when merely adopted without the technical knowledge and total situation necessary. But to record them and display some part of the pattern is just about worthwhile. It certainly shows how other systems look like partial derivations from these very schemata. But looked at without activity one can say of them something like that man said when he was shown a certain garden: 'Take away the flowers and design, and what have you got, after all?'"

Since initial publication of this document, I've come across an interview conducted by Edgardo Canton in which Catherine Hayter talks about the early

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days in Paris with Idries and Omar Ali-Shah in which she says: "[We met as a group] regularly; at least once a month. We would meet at Billy Roads' apartment on rue Campagne Première [in Paris]. This is where we started working with the Nasrudin stories. [Idries] Shah was telling us stories that we would then find in the books he was publishing. Next he gave us the Lataif exercise."

The two brothers both directed the group and were considered "interchangeable" by the group, according to Catherine Hayter. Some time afterwards she says, the two brothers "agreed to disagree" and went their separate ways. The explanation that Omar Ali-Shah gave was that he was of the persuasion that "people are not computers." I have yet to find a source reference to this interview.

So the group was prescribed exercises, unlike even long-term readers of Shah's books.

But given that we might not be able to find a Sufi Teacher within regular travelling distance, least of all perhaps one of whom Shah would have approved, and bearing in mind the things that the likes of psychologist Robert Ornstein have to say about the benefits of meditation and mindfulness, we may be left with a choice of whether it is preferable to have a tenth of something or hold out for all of nothing, which finds an echo in the Nasrudin teaching story 'A Perfect Life':

The Perfect Life

Nasrudin was sitting in a tea shop when a friend came excitedly to speak with him. "I'm about to get married, Mulla," his friend said, "and I'm very excited. Mulla, have you ever thought of marriage yourself?"

Nasrudin replied, "I did think of getting married. In my youth in fact I very much wanted to do so. I waited to find for myself the perfect wife. I travelled looking for her, first to Damascus. There I met a beautiful woman who was gracious, kind, and deeply spiritual, but she had no worldly knowledge. I travelled further west to Isphahan. There I met a woman who was both spiritual and worldly, beautiful in many ways, but we did not communicate well. Finally I went to Cairo and there after much searching I found her. She was spiritually deep, graceful, and beautiful in every respect, at home in the world and at home in the realms beyond it. I felt I had found the perfect wife."

His friend questioned him further: "Then did you marry her, Mulla?"

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“Alas,” said Nasrudin as he shook his head sadly, “She was, unfortunately, waiting for the perfect husband.”

I've just been watching the film “Good Will Hunting” and a therapist played by Robin Williams came out with a speech along these lines which presents another, realistic perspective on the matter: “She is not perfect. You are not perfect. The question is whether or not you are perfect for each other.”

“Going your own way, chanting 'Om mani padme hum'?” you may say, having read what the man had to say. “Shah would be turning in his grave if he heard that's what you do. These things need to be carefully prescribed by a Sufi Master.”

Then someone comes across an obscure document that just happens to mention that when Shah took on some of Bennett's students, one of the first things he taught them was the Buddhist chant “Om mani padme hum”. Then someone else mentions hearing of this being used before reading the teaching tales. And a third person recalls reading somewhere mention of the Master [Shah] being elsewhere doing his daily meditation. Do you honestly think that this was “carefully prescribed” as only a Sufi Master is capable? I think not. It sounds “cobbled together” to me, like the nails and the leather: making the most of what one already possessed.

So perhaps Shah might after all be having a good belly laugh in his grave? And perhaps this will make it a little easier for you to bend or turn a blind eye to the rules or wave a fond goodbye to them?

I'm also reminded of the Nasrudin tale in which he is offered nine gold coins in a dream but declines, holding out for ten. When he wakes up and finds himself without any of the gold, he cries out too late: “Okay, okay, I'll take the nine!”

Frank and Ernest



Am I bitter that twenty years ago I could have made a start on attempting to be Mindful, had Shah not persuaded me against meditation? Not at all, though I will admit to being more than a little bemused over the years. At that time my self was pretty derelict and no matter what noble aim I'd set my mind to, I don't think anything good and lasting and undistorted would have come from it. I'm grateful for becoming perhaps a little wiser as I grow into middle age and for the effect reading and working with Shah had on me.

Please remember that I'm not knocking Shah: I'm eternally grateful to him. He's been a good father to so many of us. You can go back and re-read his monumental works ten, twenty, thirty years down the line and derive fresh meanings ... still have so much work to do on oneself and still not exhaust the magic, never-emptying purse of its gold coins.

The only way I can currently operate, other than to return to a state of paradigm paralysis and a state of "woe is me; by myself I can do nothing" is to knowingly and deliberately bend the rules and knowingly and deliberately – and some perhaps with good reason would say foolishly – put on hold the intellectual and ideological arguments, the derision and other peer pressures that might otherwise prevent this; whilst being mindful of potential dangers ... to feel the fear, as they say, and do it anyway.

When all else fails / The next phase

Wikipedia has as one of its key pillars and policies, something known there as “Ignore All Rules” (IAR). What this means is that when the application of other policies or rules are found wanting, perhaps leading to quite ridiculous situations, the policy of IAR may be invoked by anyone at any level within the editorial framework to arrive at a more amicable or sensible solution.

A key quote from an essay associated with the IAR policy is this and it is just as applicable in the field of the Sufi Way as it is at Wikipedia:

"Pedantry and mastery are opposite attitudes toward rules. To apply a rule to the letter, rigidly, unquestioningly, in cases where it fits and in cases where it does not fit, is pedantry... To apply a rule with natural ease, with judgement, noticing the cases where it fits, and without ever letting the words of the rule obscure the purpose of the action or the opportunities of the situation, is mastery." — George Pólya.

For all those caught between a rock and a hard place (known to some as the Shahbot lemon squeezer) with no apparent means of egress, you might consider this your “get out of jail free card” or one of the “jokers in the pack”, to be used wisely and sparingly when other options have been exhausted, frustrated or are in some way unavailable or unattainable. It does not replace the Sufi constitution or corpus of Shah's works but provides a useful *addendum*.

In my own case, this involved suspending my own judgement and accepting for a time that another member of the group had the authority to prescribe a remedy for the tangle in which I had got myself. She suggested that for a period of time (the effect to take perhaps 3 or 6 months), I practise the Naqshbandi Rule of *hush dar dam*, that is watching the breath, attending to conscious breathing and relaxing my mind and body; and to repeat whenever I felt in some way irritated by another person to say to myself:

“The way I am feeling is nothing to do with Person A. Had anyone else said these things to me, I would have reacted in the same way.”

“The way I am feeling is nothing to do with Person B. Had anyone else said these things to me, I would have reacted in the same way.”

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“The way I am feeling is nothing to do with Person X, Y or Z. Had anyone else said these things to me, I would have reacted in the same way.”

This, along with other interventions, which included a prior physical shock and later a psychological shock to my system led to a major breakthrough and re-evaluation; freed me from the paradigm I found myself locked into, and to some extent from the clutches of the “Old Villain” as Shah refers to the phenomena in chapter on Nasrudin in *The Sufis*.

I was also directed by another member of the group to watch the five parts of a remarkable Forth Way / Sufi video animation available at YouTube entitled *The Master of the Carriage* (or buy the video on-line).

You can find the video here at YouTube:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bGK15jOjAUo>

This to some extent awoke me, though it also made clear to me that self-Work (amal) would have to follow. I was further asked to have another read through some Sufi material, such as *The Sufis*, Shah's seminal work (where he introduces and opens up the field to those interested, prior to books in which he lays down rules of engagement), and I was pleasantly surprised to find that this time round, it made a lot more sense, especially at psychological, practical, experiential and “metaphysical” levels; indeed, it seemed to provide verification of experiences that I had undergone for which I didn't have a name, and this in turn provided verification of the materials. And, of course, it showed me areas in which self-Work might usefully be applied to “seal the deal” and “fix” the exposed and developed photographic plate through experience.

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6. For a description of the Dark Night of the Soul, see:
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Afterword

There is an important and immensely practical forum message from “TRB” to me which may be considered an afterword to this document and which will make perfect sense having read the PDF.

You can find this in the files sections of the yahoo! groups caravansarai and tenth donkey. I saved the message as bending-the-bars.doc in Word/Office 97 format.



*“Heart to heart is an essential means
of passing on the secrets of the Way.”*